



Kerrin Mitchell:

Welcome to the Untapped Philanthropy podcast.

Tim Sarrantonio:

We're your hosts, Fluxx's Co-founder Kerrin Mitchell and Neon One's, Tim Sarrantonio. We've spent our career learning how to leverage technology and data in the social sector to better connect and serve our collective causes, constituents, and communities.

Kerrin Mitchell:

In this podcast series, we profile leaders, public figures, philanthropists, and industry experts to explore the fascinating intersection of funding, technology, and policy. We're here to analyze the most formative topics and trends that shape the present and future of philanthropy. Welcome back everyone to Untapped Philanthropy. Tim and I are actually taking a little bit of a breather this month to focus on some very exciting industry conferences that have been keeping us oh, so busy behind the scenes. But don't worry, we've got something very special lined up for you all. We actually want to introduce you to a brand new podcasting voice in the philanthropic space, and provide you a little sneak peek of a sister podcast that's launching soon. It's called Coffee, Tea, & Philanthropy. And in it, our host, the very great Bill Campbell, opens up his seemingly endless rolodex of longtime friends and colleagues to showcase moments that inspired them to change, to protest, and to take action on the change that they wanted to see in their community. So while we will be back with more Untapped Philanthropy soon, in the meantime, we want to make sure that you get this chance to check out this new exciting podcast. So without further ado, here's our main man Bill with Coffee, Tea, & Philanthropy. I hope you enjoyed as much as I do.

Bill Campbell:

Hello listeners. I want to invite you to join me, Bill Campbell from Fluxx to Coffee, Tea, & Philanthropy, a podcast focused on having a cup of tea or coffee and exploring moments with change makers when they choose to create a positive impact in their communities. And then also talking with some of the organizations that fund and support their work. I promise you every conversation will be engaging and you'll learn about the impactful work that people all across our country and globe are doing to make a difference. Hello, listeners. Welcome to the first episode of Coffee, Tea, & Philanthropy. We're here to have a conversation over a cuppa to explore the moments when people choose to create positive impact in their communities and the organizations that fund and support that work. Today I'm thrilled to have Dr. José González, an associate professor and the Jack C. Massey Chair of entrepreneurship at Belmont University in Nashville. He is also a dedicated community leader in the social sector who has transformed countless lives through his work with the Hispanic community in Nashville, as the co-founder of Conexión, Américas. A nonprofit organization with the mission to build a welcoming community, create opportunities where immigrant origin families can belong, contribute, and succeed. Conexión Américas received a notable, a couple notable distinctions, entrepreneurial venture of the year, Innovation and Action Award and Strengthening Families Best Practice Award. Dr. González has also been recognized as one of the 50 most influential individuals leading and shaping Nashville's future. Welcome, José.

José González:

Well, hello. It's great to join you. I'm looking forward to our conversation today.



Bill Campbell:

Thank you. Thank you for joining us. Let's dive right in. Coffee or tea. What is your go-to if you're having a hot beverage?

José González:

Most important question of the day. Hot cup of coffee.

Bill Campbell:

Cream and sugar or just black?

José González:

A little bit of cream.

Bill Campbell:

Yeah, I'm the same way. I've tried to give it up, but I have to have a little bit of cream in there.

José González:

No sugar though.

Bill Campbell:

Well, that's good. That's good. To start off, could you tell us a little bit about what you currently do, the work that you're focused on and what you enjoy about that work?

José González:

Sure, sure. Well, like you mentioned in the intro today, my main gig job is I'm a professor at Belmont University here in Nashville in the entrepreneurship and innovation at departments. In that role, I teach students that have ideas that want to change the world, how to deploy those ideas and assess their feasibility and create the business models to deploy them. We have a social entrepreneurship major, and so in addition to the traditional path of once start a business, we have a good number of students who want to start something, but not necessarily a business, but rather social enterprise. Sometimes nonprofits, sometimes even public sector work, but all of using an entrepreneurial mindset to do what they want to do. And so that's what I did today for the majority of my day. I've been involved with Conexión Américas. I know we're going to talk about it.

I'm one of the co-founders of this nonprofit that's based here in town. We co-founded it 22 years ago or so. And while I'm very, very committed, biggest cheerleader, I did retire, stepped away a couple of years ago from it, and so now I'm just a big volunteer and supporter. But I know that a lot of our conversation will be around my work, my work there. So, what do I enjoy the most? Well, certainly just service, whether it's service to my students or service to the stakeholders of the nonprofit that fuels me. And that is, that's how I've been able to build my professional career. It's brought a lot of rewards and satisfactions and some headaches sometimes, but just I like to see myself as a service leader.

Bill Campbell:



Oh, that's great. And actually, could you just share a story that you shared with me a little bit earlier about taking people along the supply chain or taking students along the supply chain, especially as it relates to coffee and giving them an understanding of that?

José González:

Yeah, I mean, how permanent pertinent, yeah, let's talk about coffee. One of the things I do enjoy in my role as a professor, one of the things I enjoy the most is taking students abroad on study abroad programs. We have a pretty robust study abroad program here at the university, and so I've gone on over probably 20 programs over the years, but one of my favorites is one that we do. We haven't done it lately, post pandemic and all of that, but it's a program to Guatemala. As an avid coffee drinker years ago, I had the question, the idea of what if we could really go to where coffee comes from and understand the supply chain and the economics of coffee. Obviously, lots of my students consider themselves coffee snobs, and they spend a lot of times in coffee houses and all that. And so I thought it would be interesting to actually as an academic exercise, find a supplier, go to a country that's a coffee producer and work with the producers and understand who touches the coffee throughout the supply chain until they walk into our local coffee house and order a \$7 - \$8 latte.

Where's the money and what happens and all the trends. And so we did that. And so we thanks through a friend of mine who owns a few coffee houses here in town connected us to one of the suppliers, a co-op up in the mountains of Guatemala. About eight hours from Guatemala City, a very, very remote, very distressed economically, but it's a co-op of hundreds of very small farmers. Like so many in the developing world, they own an acre or two tops and they grow coffee. And so that's what we did. We would go up to the mountain, spend the day picking coffee with my students. We would hand them all a basket and they would learn how to do it properly and spend seven, eight hours picking coffee. And it was a very, very powerful experience, usually, right? It's in the mountains, beautiful. Had all kinds of birds flying around, that type of thing.

But then at the end of the day, they would walk up to the owner of that land and say, all right, here's what I picked today. Pay me. And of course I get paid by the weight and it never amounted to more than a couple of dollars for the day. And then from there, that's a long story. But then from there, just really did the study of from there, what happens, who takes it, who touches it? Then you take it to the beneficiary where it's gathered and then to put in the containers and they could put on the ship that then ends up in the United States at a warehouse and then goes to a distributor, and that goes to a roaster and et cetera, et cetera. And so it was a great, great little exercise and very, very powerful for students. They would always say, I will never drink a cup of coffee the same way that I did before I did this. So that's one of the examples of things that I really enjoyed doing.

Bill Campbell:

No, that's great. And I think it reinforces what you said about service leadership. I think it also allows your students, and it's super important in entrepreneurship to walk in the shoes of other people. So I think that's really powerful. They get the sense that these people put in a hard day's work like they did, and then they understand what they're receiving for that and how that lines up in the way of poverty across Central America and across coffee producing regions. In addition to that, you bring your perspective from your early life and from your origin story as well. Can you tell us a little bit about where you grew up and if there were any role models around service or anything like that you'd like to share with us?

José González:



Sure. Well, so I grew up in, although I have lived in the United States and in Nashville in particular for, gosh, over 30 years now, so the majority of my life, but I grew up in Mexico. I grew up in Mexico City, had a pretty traditional middle class upbringing in an urban area, in an urban setting. And unlike so many of the people that Conexión serves, I was very blessed and privileged that when I moved to the United States, it wasn't necessarily because I was being pushed out or pursuing economic opportunities here. It was the short version of it. It's a love story. My wife, who I had met in Nashville, we dated for a couple of years, and then when we decided to get married, I decided to settle in Nashville for a couple of years. At the time, if you had asked me at the time, I would've said it.

So only a couple of years before we get our bearings and get traction with our marriage and all that. Here we are 30 years later. But nonetheless, I was privileged to have an education to attend university. And so when I moved to the US and in particular Nashville in the early nineties, that's at the time that really the immigrant population and in particular folks from Latin America, Mexico, and Central America at the time were moving to Nashville. And I certainly had the cultural context, spoke the language, and as an entrepreneur, as a business person at the time, I was thinking, well, all these people moving here, I'm sure they need something. What is that something they need that I can somehow provide? And so it's a long story, but that was the impetus for ultimately creating Conexión Américas, just the realization that these were folks that were coming to build Nashville. That's at a time where the Nashville boom started.

Bill Campbell:

Literally, literally build Nashville.

José González:

Literally, right? That's when we started building football stadiums and arenas, and of course all the residential neighborhoods in and around the city and the sprawl. And not unlike what started drawing people to Nashville at the time, the economic opportunity of the boom, that's when we started drawing in those days a very young population, many of them in construction. And so again, it started changing the demographic makeup of the city. And so people started showing up. You were looking around, it's like, who are all these folks that are moving here and why are they coming here?

And back in those days when immigration was not such a politicized issue, the reality is there was a lot of interest in an excitement and trying to figure out how do we better engage with all this population that's moving in? How do we serve them? How do we bring 'em to our churches? How do we sell to them? I mean, they actually have an economic power. How do we sell to them? What do they need? How do we employ them, all of that. And so anyway, that was an impetus for what later became Conexión Américas. And so certainly I would not have been able to do the work that I do today. Certainly Conexión would not have happened had I not had those experiences growing up in Mexico and having that cultural context to be able to dream and understand to and to connect and I know we'll talk more about all that, but that's kind of the quick short version of my growing up.

Bill Campbell:

No, yeah, thanks for sharing that. I actually, I think I'm going to lean right into the Conexión questions, but before that, I'll just say a little idea. José and I have known each other for a long time and he has actually helped me create my rule of thumb for where to eat at and how to grade a Mexican restaurant. And my rule of thumb for this is actually, if they have cow tongue on the menu, you're in a good place. So I still use that to this day, José



José González:

That's amazing. You never know what you say and what people are going to remember, how you're going to influence people. And so that's hilarious to say that.

Bill Campbell:

Yeah, so far it's never steered me wrong. It's always been.

José González:

I'm glad you hear that.

Bill Campbell:

So thinking about the work around Conexión, and because I looked at the website, there's just a lot of programs that you guys do. Be curious what started, what was the first sort of outreach? And I know it has a bit of an entrepreneurship bent, and then also I think you served as their CFO for a while. So you can talk a little bit about that type of work there, because I think sometimes making sure everything's working efficiently is really important. But just tell me, what was the first program and then how did you guys evolve? Right now, your offering is very broad, and I would recommend anyone go Google Conexión with an X in Nashville and just look up their website and all the great programming you're doing. But what did you start with and then how did you evolve?

José González:

Yeah, so following up on my prior answer, basically again, I'm looking around on the growth of the population and we're going, what do folks need? And I was just very lucky that I got to meet my co-founder, and my founder and I have very similar backgrounds in that we grew up, she grew up in Costa Rica, but we had similar backgrounds. We had moved to the US because we had married an American citizen. And so life had landed us in Nashville and she had a nonprofit background. In fact, at the time she was working in Atlanta before she had moved to Nashville. And so it was really kind of a conversation that started at a dinner table in a discussion around, look at the growth of the population. There's more and more people coming, and there's not, there were different agencies that were doing independent, launching a program to try to connect with Spanish speaking families here and there, but there was not an organization that had claimed stake in the ground saying, we are going to try to be the hub or the place that really focuses on this immigrant origin families.

And so what we started doing this, talking to folks around town and saying, what are you guys experiencing in the nonprofit sector? Some of the agencies, what are you seeing? Where's the need? And there were a couple of things that emerged at the beginning. One was just very basic, just connection to services, people showing up and it's like, Hey, I don't know how to enroll my children in school, and I dunno how that process is about. Or things, of course around the economics and financial sectors, how do I send money back to my home country? Or for those that had already been here a couple of years and had established themselves, I want to buy a house and I dunno how to do that. And so it was inventory of those conversations and those things that we identified what led us to the creation of Conexión.

And so the first thing that we did was we partnered with one of those programs that was already in place back then that was actually just connecting people with health resources. It was a nonprofit that existed that was doing that for the broader population, but they had started a program to work with Spanish speaking families. So we partnered with them and we said, all right, we will continue to do that, but actually expand the services not only around healthcare connections, right, referrals and just



understanding, helping people navigate, but we'll expand it to other things. And so our first program was that and information and referral services. We took an inventory of who was doing what in town. We went and talked to all of those executive directors and agencies and even financial institutions and other private sector players, and had literally, back in those days, a binder with their brochures and their listings and who was the Spanish speaking person in that particular office.

So that's how we got started. Very early on also, we recognized that people were coming here for economic reasons. That was the pull, as I mentioned earlier. And with my own background, I kind of recognized knowing how to navigate economic and financial networks and information. So financial literacy, home ownership, and early on, entrepreneurship, micro enterprise development were some of the first things that we launched. So within two or three years, we had added education services. And by that I mean is like connection, helping parents navigate the school system. If you're someone that's moving here from Guatemala, from Mexico, of course school systems are so different and expectations. And so we launched back then a program that's still going very strong today, Parents as Partners is the name of the program. It's basically a curriculum to help parents develop leadership skills and navigate the school systems to be supportive to their children's education, understanding what's the school's role and what's their role, and how to partner with the school systems and all of that. So yeah, you're right, you're writing that when you look at the website today, we have our fingers in a lot of pies. And that's all been, we are very entrepreneurial indeed. I mean, everything we do do it through an entrepreneurial lens. And I always trying to react to what does the market need, what are some of the services, products, things that people need out there, and then usually come in with programming behind them to support those.

Bill Campbell:

There's a couple of threads I want to pull on there, and I find them pretty interesting. One, when you said it was just a binder that we started with, and I'm thinking about people who have great ideas, and sometimes they get frustrated because they go to the big idea first and you're putting together what is the equivalent of what most people might have in their house of a takeout order menu binder.

You're pulling all of that together. You're getting the needed information in one place for people to access. So just encouraging listeners that if you have an idea, it can start with something as simple as a binder. If you're bringing the right people in the door and you're bringing the people who need that information together, and then you see how the organic-ness of the program and the project grows. One thing I noticed, I grew up in Orlando, which has a strong and relatively politically well connected Latin American community, a lot of Puerto Ricans and Cubans, a lot of Venezuelans now. And you always saw their presence there. And then I moved to Atlanta, and the presence diversity in Atlanta sometimes was binary, and it didn't include everyone in the same way. And you'd look at the population and you'd say there was a large Latin population in Atlanta, and it's starting to change.

But when I first moved here, I don't necessarily see them showing up quite the same way that other communities might be showing up. And it wasn't really through fault of their own. They knew where their shops were, they knew where their people were, but it was more about connecting it to the wider network. And there's a great organization here at Latin American Association that is doing that work now and doing a great job, but you could definitely see the need as communities come together. So then over the years, with so many experiences with this group, what are some things that surprised you? And are there any items that you learned that you want to share with our audience?

José González:



Yeah, yeah. What you mentioning certainly resonates. The Atlanta experience and the Nashville experience shares a lot of commonality. It's not unlike many of the experiences of many of the cities in the South that have experienced over the last couple of decades, this truly exponential growth. I mean, if you look at the highest growth rates of Hispanic populations across the United States, those are not in the usual suspect states. They're not yet on an absolute value. There's a lot of people, of course, in the Californias and Texas and Floridas of the world, but in terms of growth, it's the South, it's the South where it's happening, it's Little Rock, it's Atlanta, it's Charlotte, it's Nashville, it's Raleigh. And so this populations have at stake a couple of decades, and some cities are ahead than others. Some states are ahead than others. And in their integration of these communities into the broader fabric of society.

And that's something that we at Conexión understood very early, took very seriously and really crafted our whole strategy around promoting the integration into the community as one of the tenants of what we were trying to do. I think that one of the successes early on for us is that we came up with a little construct, if you would, little, as part of when we were going around in the early days and pitching about what we were doing, we would just tell the story that really integration, if we're about promoting integration of the newcomer, you don't need to be foreign born. When you arrive to new place, a new place to understand this, you move from Orlando to Atlanta. I'm sure you experienced that. So integration when you arrive to a new place happens under three dimensions, economic, social, and civic. For most people that move, most people that move, it's the economic reason.

There's a job, there's an opportunity. And so you arrive to a place and you say like, let's get settled. Let's start stabilizing our finances. Let's start making money. Let's find a place to live, buy the car, all of that. So first comes the economic integration, then comes the social integration, which is just building that network of people that are like you and expanding your social network. And so that happens in the churches, that happens in the civic organizations, that happens in the school with your children's school, the soccer team and whatnot. It's the social integration piece. And ultimately, and hopefully it's the civic integration, it's this realization that happens when it clicks that you're like, oh, I live here, this is home, and I need to actively participate in what happens here. And that takes shapes in a lot of different ways. Sometimes it's just taking leadership in the organizations in which you are part of.

So I'm going to join the PTO at my child's school, or I'm going to participate in the civic process. I'm going to support candidates running for office. I am going to serve on a board of directors of a nonprofit. And so that story of what we're trying to do is to help people on their process of integration into the community really resonated. That's something that I learned early on. I'll tell you, I wouldn't have had it articulated back then. That's how you could build a strategy around that messaging. And so I think that we've been successful because of that. And when I'm familiar with some of the organizations and efforts around the country, those that have, even if they're on user the same language, that have an approach that is similar to that, are those places, those communities where things have moved faster. And where today, I mean, I can tell you today, and we're very proud because in Nashville, I mean the presence of these populations, and now it's not only the Latino community, it's the broader foreign born population, which we have a good number and a very diverse foreign population in Nashville. There is a sense that we're all rowing the same direction. For the most part, the narrative in the city, on the city is a positive one in contrast to what, what's happening at the national level with the very toxic discourse around the value of entrepreneurs, of immigrants in our communities. So that's one of my takeaways and what I think has worked, and I'll stop there.

Bill Campbell:

So often the immigrants are the entrepreneurs, right? So when you're saying entrepreneurs and immigrants, yes, they're starting out, but they're also building small businesses and need to understand how to support that.



José González:

Well, no doubt. I'll tell you. I mean, I'll interrupt you there, but I mean absolutely from an academic perspective, for me early on took very strong interest in that--the notion of the role that immigrants play and how they use entrepreneurship to affect their economic mobility. And so there's just, in fact, my dissertation for my doctoral program was precisely on the topic of immigrant entrepreneurship, because that's a thing, right? That's a big thing. The pursuit of entrepreneurial endeavors of immigrant communities is one of the very, very important factors for economic prosperity and mobility in our communities.

Bill Campbell:

And I'll just add to that, that creates the push and pull of some of the other integrations or connections that you're looking at, right? The social, the economic, and the civic, because it makes other, you become an owner and a stakeholder in the community in the same way that if you became a homeowner, you would start to become more invested in the local school, you'd start to become more invested in the community. So entrepreneurship definitely drives all of those other things that connection, Conexión focuses on.

José González:

Indeed.

Bill Campbell:

So I'll brag on you a little bit, President Obama came by Conexión and visited and wanted to see what you guys were doing. You have been recognized as leaders in this outreach and in this space, just curious what that moment felt like and if there are other moments that you want to share with us that you can brag about Conexión success.

José González:

Well, yeah. There's lots of moments where I'm very, very proud of what the team, it does take a village, right? This is not work that I've done. It's a lot of people over the years that have been supportive that have made it happen. Certainly that could be a whole other episode the day that President Obama came. That's certainly a highlight of your career. When I share that story, I always tell folks, it's like regardless of your political persuasion, having the president of the United States come to your place of work is a once in a lifetime thing. And it is just a massive logistical undertaking. And again, that's a fun story to just share how we learned he was coming, it was about a week before, and then what happened that week in preparation for, and of course the day off. But most importantly, I think that to connect to what I was saying earlier, the reason why he came is to deliver.

Back in the day, he was pushing promoting legislation around DACA and some of the things that he got to do, some of the things he did not get to do, but he wanted to deliver that speech around support for immigration reform in a place that where most people would not have thought of as a place where a lot of immigrants were. So Nashville, what I remember hearing is that he wants to go to a place that is doing immigration in decoration. Well, and Nashville. Nashville is on that radar screen. So that was a moment of pride for us. Just Nashville was on, because of course we were not the only ones, but we were involved in that work.

So yeah, he came and so he did the speech from one of our community center, it's called Casa Azafrán, and of course, you can imagine all the logistics and security and all the things. That was one of the lucky ones that got invited to be in the room when he delivered the speech. And my co-founder and I



welcomed him when he came into the building, when they called the Beast, Beast, pulled up and came through the back door and had an opportunity to visit with him and chat with him. And so yeah, of course, it was a very special day for all of us to host them. Certainly the message of what he was delivering was exactly what we were advocating for, what we'd been fighting for a long time. And so it was very, very special that day. That day certainly stands as one of the most joyful and rewarding ones.

But on the other side, there's many others where many other days that for me personally, were just as meaningful, maybe not as visible, not as popular of whatever. But one of the things really, one of the programs I really love is the home ownership program, because that's a program where we sort of hold people by their hands of walking 'em through the home ownership process. Nothing says American Dream, like buying your own house, being in debt for the next 30 years, but walking with an immigrant family through that process and getting them to ultimately purchase their home and going close in with them and handling the keys to their house, that for me personally, is a very moving, very, very personal, but very impactful moment. I love moments like those.

Bill Campbell:

Yeah. So you've touched on a few things there that I can relate to. I used to work at Habitat for Humanity, and so I have been at some of those housing times where we're handing over the keys and understanding how special that is. And then also because of Jimmy Carter's experience or engagement with that organization, I also know the feeling of having the secret service come up to you and ask you why you're standing there. So I can only imagine how important that day was. But also the reason I asked the other question was that the importance of life-changing events that you get to engage in are also just really powerful. And sometimes those don't go as remarked on the website or these other places and are much more personal in that connection. So as we wrap up, I want to ask one more question, and I want to circle back to your role as a professor, your role as guiding young people as they look to make an impact. What's some of the advice that you would give them or what's something that you might share with them as people think about being in service to others?

José González:

Well, I mean the bad news, and the good news is there is no shortage of wicked problems in our planet today. If you just look around, and there is all kinds of causes that require energy, commitment, passion from young people that are creative and that are passionate and that are compassionate. And so for young people that are getting started, it really is about connecting the dots. Again, my lens through a lot of what I do is, and talk a lot about entrepreneurship. And I'm often asked, well, is entrepreneurship something that you are born with or something that you can develop? My answer to that is that everybody has the potential of being an entrepreneur, in this case, a social entrepreneur. What you need to know, what you need to do is A, find the cause that matters to you and commit to it.

And once you do that, then the creative juices in your brain ignite. And then it becomes not easy, but then it becomes a path that is worth fighting for. And then you find once you find that and you surround your people, yourself around people that are working towards a similar cause, then the momentum that it's built, it's hard to describe and it's hard to explain until you live it. If someone had asked me 25 years ago, this is going to be your path and you're going to experience this kinds of rewards and successes, I would not have believed them because I was on a total different path that was, I was in public accounting and was doing financial statements and really didn't think much about social causes. But it was that in my case, that connection to the immigrant experience and the growth and the realization of the opportunities and the aspirations that all of these folks that I was meeting and working with were bringing to the table what ignited my juices and my energy.



And so I say it's the good news and the bad news because unfortunately there's just a lot of work to be done in society today. So what I would say is just latch on to the one that you care about. Find those that are already doing some work in that space and show up. 50% of it is just showing up. The other 50% is just when you say that you're going to do something, do it. And then it just happens. It just pops. And so I would say again, this notion of social impact as a career, as a professional journey should be considered by everybody because it is fulfilling, it's rewarding, and it's important work that brings you purpose. And there, I'll stop there.

Bill Campbell:

Thank you so much for joining us and sharing your story. José, I think it's the perfect ending to our first episode. It's been an absolute pleasure having you on the show.

José González:

Hey, listen, this is great just being able to reflect on your questions and catching up, and I appreciate the invitation.